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Grand Strategy or Grand Identity? Narratives of “Universal Values” and Autonomy in Japanese Foreign Policy*

di ERIK ISAKSSON

Abstract – Narratives emphasizing “universal” and “shared” values as well as “democracy,” “human rights,” “the rule of law,” and “freedom” are a staple in Japanese foreign policy and are ubiquitous to the extent that any discussion of a Japanese “Grand Strategy” must relate to them. At the same time, there is plenty of evidence that Japan’s own democracy is challenged at home. Where does this discrepancy come from? Most previous research has ignored the narratives themselves, rather focusing on the policies they underpin. Ontological security scholarship has shown that a strive for autonomy – an identity as an important state – undergirds contentious political issues in Japan, and that this autonomy narrative constituted the universal values narrative during the governments of Abe Shinzo. Drawing on that work, this paper seeks complete the picture on what this narrative means to Japan? The paper first uses previous research to examine the roots of the autonomy narrative, and how words from the values narrative and the autonomy narrative started appearing together at the same time as the rise of the traditionally anti-mainstream faction (Seiwaken) of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Second, the article examines MOFA Bluebooks and speeches by the prime minister in the years 2008–2012, to see whether and to what extent the narrative on values during this period was constituted similar to the way it was during the Abe governments. The result is mixed: there were similarities, but the narrative was less prominent during 2008–2012. The paper argues that the results corroborate that a combined values/autonomy narrative has gained a measure of dominance in Japanese foreign policy, and that an ontological security framework that is sensitive to multiple ontological insecurities within states might allow future research to understand what lies behind the differences between the Abe governments, and the governments in 2008–2012.

* Particular thanks for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article go to Linus Hagström and Ra Mason along with other participants in the annual conference of the Nordic Association for the Study of Contemporary Japanese Society in Oslo, 12–13 May 2022, as well as to Jesper Dunell, Karl Gustafsson, Alexander Ryan and other participants in peer review seminars at Stockholm University in Spring 2022.

Introduction

Why does Japan talk about “universal values”, “shared values”, “democracy”, “human rights”, “the rule of law”, and “freedom” in its foreign policy¹? This question becomes particularly puzzling, when one considers how there has been criticism against Japan in later years that its democracy at home is challenged, particularly regarding freedom of the press². Granted, this talk is not entirely new; these words have appeared in Japanese foreign policy narratives for a long time³. However, during the two conservative governments of the late Abe Shinzo (2007-2008 and 2012-2020), they started being used together with the imperative that Japan needs to be an international leader of their defense and with the identity claim that Japan is a long-time democrat. They were also increasingly used in an international security context⁴. This was exemplified by the introduction of policies and strategies like the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP), and “value-oriented diplomacy” that argued Japan should take on a prominent international

¹ Hereafter, the shorthands “universal values narrative” and “values narrative” are interchangeably used to refer to Japan’s narratives on universal and shared values that emphasize democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and freedom. The claim of universality is, of course, a construction and inherently political, and this paper does not seek to essentialize either of these terms. The aim of the paper is, rather, to analyze the specific ways in which the Japanese government talks about these terms.

² Freedom House (2021), *Freedom in the World 2021: Japan*. [Online], <https://freedomhouse.org/country/japan/freedom-world/2021> (Accessed on 14.5.2022); United Nations Human Rights Council. (2017). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression on his mission to Japan. [Online], <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1301336?ln=en>. (Accessed on 14.5.2022).

³ MOFA. (1957). 「二、わが国外交の基調。」『わが外交の近況 昭和32年9月』 [Online], <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1957/s32-1-2.htm>. (Accessed on 24.4.2022).

MOFA. (1970). 「第二節 基本的指針」『わが外交の近況 昭和44年度(第14号)』 [Online], <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1970/s44-contents.htm>. (Accessed on 28.4.2022).

MOFA. (1980). 「昭和61年版「わが外交の近況」の刊行にあたって」 [Online], [mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1980/s55-contents.htm](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1980/s55-contents.htm). (Accessed on 24.4.2022).

⁴ E. Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat, Future Leader: the Particular Logic of Japan’s Values Discourse*, “UI Brief” (2022), no. 2, pp. 1-14.

role drawing on its history as a democrat to assist other budding democracies. These particular slogans later fell into disuse, but the main signs of the narrative underpinning them – “universal values”, “shared values” “democracy”, “human rights”, “the rule of law”, and “freedom”⁵ – have since then reappeared prominently within, for example, Japan’s first ever National Security Strategy from 2013, official descriptions of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) starting in 2016, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) since 2017.

One might reasonably contend that a rhetorical commitment to values in foreign policy does not necessarily translate into upholding those values domestically; there might be other reasons behind the narrative used. This paper agrees. There are, however, limitations in the previous scholarship that has offered these types of explanations. The little previous research that has touched on this narrative has relegated the actual discourse, what is being said, to a level of secondary importance. Instead, it has attempted to explain the policies that the narrative underpins, such as the AFP and the latter-day FOIP. Balance of power-realists, on the one hand, have argued that these policies are meant to counter China’s material influence⁶. Complex interdependence-liberals, on the other, have seen them as designed precisely to uphold an international order that is materially beneficial to Japan⁷. These are all important issues and reasonable explanations for the motivations behind the policies. What they as explanations do not do, however, is show why Japan employs these specific narratives to balance China, or

⁵ Original Japanese terms are *fuhenteki kachi*, *kyoyusuru kachi*, *tomo ni suru kachi*, *minshushugi*, *jinken*, *ho no shihai*, *jiyu*.

⁶ E.g., Y. Soeya, 「日本のインド太平洋外交と近隣外交」, 『国際問題』 (2020), no. 688, pp. 18-32; M. Kawai, 「第5章『一帯一路』構想と『インド太平洋』構想」 in N. Inaba (ed), 反グローバリズム再考: 『反グローバリズム再考: 国際経済秩序を揺るがす危機要因の研究』 (世界経済研究会) 報告書, Tōkyō, 2018, pp. 95-155.

⁷ E.g., Y. Funabashi - G. J. Ikenberry, *Introduction: Japan and the Liberal International Order* in Y. Funabashi - G.J. Ikenberry (ed), *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order*, Washington, DC, 2020, pp. 1-35; T. Satake, *Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and its Implication for ASEAN*, “Southeast Asian Affairs” (2019), pp. 69-82.

to uphold a materially beneficial order. After all, it seems possible for Japan to shed universal values rhetoric, and still balance against China. Some, like Hosoya Yuichi⁸, have allowed that an increased focus on norms in international relations since the 1990s is a trend “Japan cannot ignore” that has contributed to these narratives, but that still leaves one wondering what the dynamics are that purportedly force Japan to use a certain narrative. While there is plenty of research on how Japanese identity is constructed through narratives that produce difference with Others⁹, and through domestic institutions¹⁰, neither this scholarship has dealt much specifically with Japan’s values narratives.

To even begin to answer the question of why the Japanese government employs these narratives, we need to understand what they mean *to them*, and this requires an investigation into how they construct them discursively. This has partly been done in previous research, which has shown that the narratives during the Abe governments functioned to construct an identity of Japan as a long-time democrat and an international leader, drawing on a long-standing narrative of Japan as lacking autonomy in international affairs¹¹. This article builds on this previous research and examines whether the universal values narrative was constituted in the same way – emphasizing Japan’s democratic credentials, and the need for Japan to be a leader – during the intervening years between the two Abe governments (2008-2012). It does so to examine whether the historical anxiety regarding Japan’s autonomy – an anxiety of not being seen as an important state rather than one that worries about losing agency – is present more broadly in Japanese politics than only in the milieu that gathered around Abe

⁸ Y. Hosoya, *The Rise and Fall of Japan’s Grand Strategy: The “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” and the Future Asian Order*, “The Asia-Pacific Review”, vol. 18 (2011), no. 1, p. 15.

⁹ E.g., L. Hagström - K. Gustafsson, *Japan and identity change: why it matters in International Relations*, “The Pacific Review” vol. 28 (2015), no. 1, pp. 1-22; T. Tamaki, *The Persistence of Reified Asia as Reality in Japanese Foreign Policy Narratives*, “The Pacific Review”, vol. 28 (2015), no. 1, pp. 23-45.

¹⁰ E.g., A. Oros, *International and domestic challenges to Japan’s post-war security identity: ‘norm constructivism’ and Japan’s new ‘proactive pacifism’*, “The Pacific Review”, vol. 28 (2015), no. 1, pp. 139-160.

¹¹ Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...*, cit. pp. 1-14.

Shinzo. The findings are mixed, and the paper argues for future research to apply an ontological security approach that looks at the potential for differing conceptions of ontological security in Japan. The strive for autonomy, in other words for status as an important state, can explain part of the motivation behind Japan's universal values discourse, but it remains to be studied how manifestly different levels of anxiety among different governments regarding national identity matter to Japan's foreign policy.

Ontological Security and "Autonomy"

The paper employs a basic ontological security theoretical approach that sees security in the Self – security in one's identity or ontological security – as a driving force for foreign policy. Actors within states seek ontological security because they want to maintain, in the words of Brent Steele¹², "consistent self-concepts". But who, then, is the ontologically insecure subject? Can "Japan" feel ontological insecurity? Jennifer Mitzen contends that it is useful to treat states "as if" they were persons, because groups (nations) maintain distinctiveness by routinizing their relationship to other groups (nations)¹³. However, this, and Steele's position that state agents "are the state", because they "have the moral burden of making policy choices *and* the capacity to implement those decisions" draws attention away from the possibility that the ontological security of other powerful actors, like opposition politicians or influential elites, can have bearing on decisions, and that the ontological insecurities could change with a change in government¹⁴. The Japanese autonomy narrative introduced above, for example, can be exemplified by the founding declaration of the Liberal Democratic Party, which pessimistically stated that "[...] patriotism and the spirit of autonomy is lost, politics are in a stupor, the economy is far from independent. [...] [A]n independent system

¹² B. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, London, 2008, p. 3.

¹³ J. Mitzen, *Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma*, "European Journal of International Relations", vol. 12 (2006), no. 3, p. 351.

¹⁴ Steele, *Ontological Security...*, cit. p. 18.

[of sovereign rule] is still not in place [...]”¹⁵. The LDP has been in power (almost) ever since, but Japan has never strayed from its close relationship with the U.S., for example, even though the U.S. has been an important “other” throughout the postwar period, one that supposedly kept Japan from becoming fully autonomous¹⁶. This could of course come from other factors than differing ontological security perceptions, such as a sense of physical security through the U.S.-Japan Alliance, but the state-as-person view precludes us from imagining the possibility of different conceptions of ontological security within states, and the possibility that those differences allow for different outcomes. This makes it important to examine the intervening period between the two Abe governments, to see whether the identity narrative identified during the Abe governments was present during the intervening period. If it was not, or was less present, there could be room for the argument that different political actors conceive of their ontological security differently.

This paper follows Suzuki Shogo, in positing that anxiety related to Japanese autonomy is the main ontological security issue that has undergirded other contentious political issues in Japan since the end of World War II¹⁷. It furthers builds on Ayse Zarakol’s observation that desire for respect and recognition by the international community is that which has guided Japan’s foreign policy decisions¹⁸. This anxiety has been particularly identifiable in the milieu around the conservative *Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyukai* (*Seiwaken*) within the LDP, which since its founding constituted the intraparty opposition to the factions that supported the dominant Yoshida Doctrine in foreign policy, whereby Japan “kept its head down” in military affairs and focused on its economy. This paper’s usage of “autonomous” is no direct and perfect translation of terms used in Japanese, but rather a term to capture a strive

¹⁵ LDP. (2022). 「立党宣言」 [Online], <https://www.jimin.jp/aboutus/declaration/> (Accessed on 25.4.2022).

¹⁶ S. Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese ‘Other’ in Japan’s Construction of Identity: Is China a Focal Point of Japanese Nationalism?* “The Pacific Review”, vol. 28 (2015), no. 1, pp. 95-116.

¹⁷ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit. p. 100.

¹⁸ A. Zarakol, *Ontological (in)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan*, “International Relations”, vol. 24 (2010) no. 1, pp. 3-23.

for prestige that is present in political narratives emanating from this milieu. “Autonomous” or “independent” (*dokuritsushita*) are words that tend to be used in direct conjunction with a call for patriotism or pride in the Japanese nation and calls for a stronger Japan. An example of this is the LDP declaration which states that Japan was weakened by the initial policy of the U.S. occupation, and that patriotism was unduly suppressed; this is a different type of anxiety regarding autonomy, than anxiety that Japan’s agency being challenged. The paper therefore wants “autonomous” state to be understood not as the opposite to “unfree” or “dependent”, but as the opposite to “insignificant”, and as a goal meant to secure Japan’s status as (at the very least) an equal with other states. The anxiety felt by some Japanese actors on the political right, is thus anxiety that Japan is seen as insignificant in international politics¹⁹.

The paper employs a discourse analytical approach that sees identities as coming into existence through biographical narratives about the Self, stories through which the Self is understood and acquires meaning to the individual in question²⁰. In the following empirical section, the paper first recalls previous research to show how the search for autonomy has roots in Japanese foreign policy since the Meiji period (1868-1912), and that since the first Abe government and the rise of the *Seiwaken* within the LDP, references to Japanese autonomy or significance have become part and parcel of the universal values narrative, creating what the paper refers to as a values/autonomy narrative. The paper then examines Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bluebooks and the Prime minister’s yearly speech to the National Diet (Parliament) between 2008-2012. It does so to see whether and how the values/autonomy narrative identified during the Abe governments was present during these intervening years between his two governments. In the language of ontological security studies, the expressions of this narrative are expressions of anxiety that the narrative tries to suppress, to narrate a stable Self. The results show that the picture is blurred, but broadly, the combined narrative was weaker during

¹⁹ Accordingly, the paper uses “autonomous identity” and “autonomy narrative” to refer to identities and narratives that emphasize an important and significant international role for Japan.

²⁰ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Palo Alto, 1991, p. 243.

the intervening years. The paper argues that anxiety relating to Japan as not autonomous/insignificant, characteristic of the LDP *Seiwaken* milieu, is the main factor that accounts for the difference between the narratives during the intervening years and the Abe years. It also contends that this *Seiwaken*-felt anxiety, which forces the actors prop up their identity through narratives, accounts for the discrepancy between Japan's democracy deteriorating at home, and Japan's promoting "universal values" abroad.

Champion of Universal Values, Important State in International Politics

Roots of Autonomy Narrative: from the Meiji Period Onwards

This section draws on previous research for an overview of the history of the autonomy narrative. As Suzuki has argued, a main point of anxiety that has undergirded contentious political issues in postwar Japan, such as revision of the constitution, is a perceived lack of autonomy of the state²¹. The idea of a lack of autonomy, or a sense of not being on equal terms with other states in the international system, has been around for a very long time. 1930s Japan saw its foreign policy objectives as best served by a position as a hegemon in East Asia, and before that, Meiji Japan was motivated by a desire for a position of equality with "Occidental World Powers"²². According to Stefan Tanaka, Meiji Japan accepted "sweeping views of world development" from Europe and identified Japan's position within this view as the main problem²³.

After the war, Japanese autonomy was an important enough issue that it made it into the founding declaration of the LDP, quoted in the previous section²⁴. The narrative was expressed in similar ways during the Cold War as it is today, only without incorporating

²¹ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit., p. 100.

²² J. Crowley, *Japan's Quest for Autonomy: National Security and Foreign Policy, 1930-1938*. Princeton, 1966, pp. xv-xvi.

²³ S. Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts Into History*, Berkeley, 1994, p. 33.

²⁴ LDP (2022), 「立党宣言」 [Online], <https://www.jimin.jp/about-us/declaration/> (Accessed on 25.4.2022).

the universal values narrative. For example, in the 1980 MOFA Bluebook, Foreign Minister Ito Masayoshi described Japanese foreign policy as aiming to “proactively contribute to world peace and stability” and that Japan aims to become a “trusted and respected country”²⁵. Concern over autonomy was expressed differently by different actors, but it was a concern shared by actors with otherwise wildly different politics. Suzuki has called the two post-war groups who felt anxiety regarding Japanese autonomy the “idealist left” and “idealist right”²⁶. The idealist left saw the U.S.- Japan alliance as hindering their desired identity of Japan as being a state pursuing “unarmed neutrality”. They were, however, marginalized in the 1990s when the Socialist Party imploded. The idealist right, or the group Richard Samuels has called the “neo-autonomists”²⁷ – those seeking to distance Japan from the U.S. and to strengthen domestic military capability – has gradually seen more success. A typical example of this group was Ishihara Shintaro, who in the late 1980s together with Sony executive Morita Akio wrote *A Japan that can say No*, arguing for greater autonomy from the U.S. and greater domestic military capabilities. While Japan is still a staunch U.S. ally, its own military capabilities have steadily grown; the reinterpretation of the Constitution in 2014 that allowed for collective self-defence and the related security laws of 2015 can be seen as a pinnacle in Japan’s moving toward stronger military capabilities. Additionally, the most important issue to the idealist right, not just reinterpreting, but changing the Japanese constitution to get rid of the “peace clause” Article 9, which prohibits Japan from having “war potential” and renounces war as a “sovereign right of the nation”, has gradually become more realistic. The aim to change the constitution is now shared by large parts of the political opposition²⁸. As detailed below, the idealist right, centred around the *Seiwaken*, has gained greater prominence within the LDP.

²⁵ MOFA (1980), 「昭和61年版「わが外交の近況」の刊行にあたって」 [Online], mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/1980/s55-contents.htm (Accessed on 24.4.2022).

²⁶ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit., pp. 95-116.

²⁷ R. Samuels, *Japan's Goldilocks Strategy*, “The Washington Quarterly”, vol. 29 (2006), no. 4, pp. 111-127.

²⁸ This is, of course, a simplification, since there are many different ideas about what it is in the constitution that should change. Nevertheless, it is

During the Cold War, the idealist right was largely side-lined in favor of the supporters of the mainstream Yoshida Doctrine, who saw Japan's interests as best served by "keeping its head down" in international politics, focusing on economic growth and leaving it to the U.S. to care for the defence of Japan²⁹. In spite of their marginalization, their politics do have a long history. This can be traced back to influential LDP figures like Kishi Nobusuke (Prime Minister 1957-60) and Hatoyama Ichiro's (Prime Minister 1954-1956) conservative Democratic Party, which merged with Yoshida Shigeru's (Prime Minister 1946-47 and 1948-45) Liberal Party to form the LDP in 1955. As Nakanishi Hiroshi has argued, Hatoyama, Kishi, and later Fukuda Takeo (Prime Minister 1974-76) saw Japan under the Yoshida Doctrine as not autonomous and on unequal footing with other states³⁰. Nevertheless, they and what became their LDP faction, the *Seiwaken*, lost the battle for the direction of Japanese foreign policy with what became the Cold War establishment of the LDP, made up by the *Kochikai* faction on the one hand, founded by Ikeda Hayato in 1957, and the followers of Tanaka Kakuei on the other³¹. *Seiwaken* and the idealist right were resigned to serve as the "anti-mainstream" of the party, delivering prime ministers but largely accepting the Yoshida consensus³². With electoral reform and a changing international landscape, the popularity of the Yoshida Doctrine waned in the 1990s. This brought about the rise of what Tobias Harris has called the "new conservatives", gathered around the autonomy-oriented *Seiwaken* milieu³³. Since Mori's Yoshiro's prime ministership in 2000, *Seiwaken* has delivered every LDP prime minister apart from Aso

reasonable to say that political discourse in Japan has moved in a direction more conducive to changing the constitution and Article 9 in some way.

²⁹ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit., pp. 95-116.

³⁰ H. Nakanishi, 「敗戦国の外交戦略: 吉田茂の外交とその継承者」『戦争史研究国際フォーラム報告書. 第2回』(2003), pp. 122-135.

³¹ J. A. A. Stockwin, *Japanese Foreign Policy and Understanding Japanese Politics: The Writings of J.A.A. Stockwin*, Leiden, 2012, p. 44.

³² K. Zakowski, *Kochikai of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party and its Evolution after the Cold War*, "The Korean Journal of International Studies", vol. 9 (2011), no. 2, p. 183; T. Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan*, London, 2020, p. 28.

³³ Harris. *The Iconoclast...*, cit., p. 58.

Taro (2008-9), Suga Yoshihide (2020-2021), and Kishida Fumio (2021-), all of whom were close confidants of the prime minister who served the longest during this time, Abe Shinzo. This former anti-mainstream in the LDP has effectively displaced the former Yoshida mainstream in the party, and with their rise, their emphasis on Japan's lack of autonomy has also gained greater weight in foreign policy discourse, as the author of this paper has shown and as is recalled in the next section³⁴.

The End of the Cold War and the Post-2006 Abe Governments

This section draws on previous research, particularly by the author of this article, to give an overview of how the values/autonomy was constituted during the Abe governments. First, it is worth mentioning that the change toward a combined narrative of values and autonomy did not happen overnight. As Karel Zakowski, Beata Bochorodyzy, and Marcin Socha have argued, the AFP has resemblances to the foreign policy pushed by Abe Shintaro as foreign minister in the 1980s³⁵. This was dubbed "creative diplomacy" and aimed, among other things, at increasing cooperation with the Western block by emphasizing common values. The approach stemmed from Japan's "global responsibilities to the international community"³⁶, a type of wording that appears often in the contemporary Japanese values/autonomy narrative, emphasizing that Japan has a certain given role to fulfill. As Suzuki has argued, however, "Japan's democratic values" were not used to the same extent during the Cold War as key markers of Japanese national identity, as they have been since its end³⁷. This rhetoric first caught steam after the end of the Cold War and received another boost by the first Abe government (2006-2007), which brought it to the fore in a way previously not seen. The post-Cold War boost revolved around Japan's Official Development Assistance policy, while the second boost came with Foreign Minister Aso Taro's introduction of the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity (AFP)

³⁴ Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...*, cit., pp. 1-14.

³⁵ K. Zakowski - B. Bochorodycz - M. Socha, *Japan's Foreign Policy Making: Central Government Reforms, Decision-Making Processes, and Diplomacy*, Cham, 2018, p. 118.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit., p. 109.

and value-oriented diplomacy, two strategies that aimed to support an “Arc” of states throughout Eurasia in becoming mature democracies³⁸. In 1992, Japan introduced its first ever Official Development Assistance Charter, stating that its aid is meant to support “democratization, human rights, and a market-oriented economy in developing countries”³⁹. Authors focusing on Japan’s ODA policy, such as Atsuko Geiger have tended to treat the increased use of universal values narratives as an extension of the emphasis on promoting democracy from the ODA Charter⁴⁰. In the face of the security challenge constituted by China, Japan is said to “hope to strengthen the ties with its allies” through policies like the AFP. Taniguchi Tomohiko has similarly argued that the AFP was an effort to cement its credentials as a reliable partner, but also meant to, crucially, “establish Japan’s democratic identity”⁴¹. The latter point gets to what is the core of the matter since the first Abe government’s push for universal values and highlights what those focusing on the ODA Charter miss: during the Abe government, universal values became a central part of Japanese ontological security seeking through the autonomy narrative, exemplified by the references to how Japan needs to lead. As shown by previous research⁴², this combined narrative during the Abe governments can be exemplified by Bluebook entries that talk about how the international community appreciates Japan’s efforts emphasizing freedom, democracy, fundamental human rights, and the rule of law, and that Japan is bringing back its “strong presence” and “self-confidence” to the world stage⁴³. Aso, as foreign minister in

³⁸ T. Aso (2006), 「自由と繁栄の弧」をつくる 拡がる日本外交の地平 外務大臣 麻生太郎 日本国際問題研究所セミナー講演」 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/enzetsu/18/easo_1130.html. (Accessed on 24.4.2022).

³⁹ K. Sugiura, 「日本の「民主化外交」-1990年代以降の日本の民主化支援活動」 『京都女子大学現代社会研究』 vol. 9 (2006), pp. 28.

⁴⁰ A. Geiger. (2019). Japan’s Support for Democracy-Related Issues – Mapping Survey. [Online], https://www.jcie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Japan-Democracy-Survey-2019_FINAL.pdf. (Accessed on 13.08.2022).

⁴¹ T. Taniguchi, *Beyond the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”: Debating Universal Values in Japanese Grand Strategy*, “GMF Asia Paper Series”, 2010.

⁴² Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...*, cit., pp. 1-14.

⁴³ MOFA (2013), 「平成 25年版外交青書(外交青書 2013)の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書2013』 [Online], <https://www.>

the first Abe government, wrote in his Bluebook introduction that Japan seeks to “contribute to stability and prosperity through universal values”⁴⁴. The 2018 version of the bluebook had Foreign Minister Kono Taro stating that the international order built on universal values is threatened, and that Japan needs to take on an even greater role than before⁴⁵. Abe wrote in his op-ed in Project Syndicate in late 2012 that Japan is “one of the oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia” and that the “U.S. needs Japan as much as Japan needs the U.S. The op-ed proposed a “democratic security diamond” now known as the “QUAD”⁴⁶, drawing clear parallels between Japan’s democratic history, the need for Japanese leadership, and international security.

Values and Autonomy Between the Abe Governments

This section examines MOFA Bluebooks and prime minister’s speeches to the National Diet during the intervening years between the two Abe governments. As briefly outlined above, and as shown in previous research, during the Abe governments values were fused with a history-writing of Japan as a long-time democrat and as a state whose leadership role in the world is needed. In 2007, Abe stepped down from the prime ministership due to health issues. He was succeeded by Fukuda Yasuo, also from the LDP but traditionally seen as more interested in good ties with China⁴⁷. He was also a rival of Aso Taro, who had been foreign minister during

mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2013/pdf/pdfs/0_2.pdf. (Accessed on 24.09.2022).

⁴⁴ MOFA (2007), 「平成19年版(2007年)外交青書の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書 2007』 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2007/pdf/pdfs/0_1.pdf. (Accessed on 29.10.2021).

⁴⁵ MOFA. (2018). 「平成30年版外交青書（外交青書2018）巻頭言」 in 『外交青書 2018』 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2018/pdf/pdfs/0_1.pdf. (Accessed on 29.4.2022). See Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...* for a more detailed account of how this narrative is constituted.

⁴⁶ S. Abe, *Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond. Project Syndicate*, “Project Syndicate”, 2013, [link], <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/a-strategic-alliance-for-japan-and-india-by-shinzoabe?barrier=accesspaylog>. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁴⁷ Zakowski *et al.*, *Japan’s Foreign Policy...*, cit., p. 48.

Abe's first government and was then closely tied to the universal values narrative. Neither Fukuda lasted long in the prime minister's office. He was replaced by Aso himself in 2008, who subsequently lost the lower house election in 2009 to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The foreign minister's introductions to the MOFA Bluebook from these years steer clear of "universal values" or "democracy" and the autonomy narrative. The 2008 version is low key, neither referring to values nor to autonomy, but the 2009 version by Aso's foreign minister Nakasone Hirofumi contains clear references to the autonomy narrative, aiming at international importance and prestige for Japan. It is stated that the aim of diplomacy is to defend the "honor" of the nation and to make the people proud of their country. Japan is said to have overcome many challenges and can be proud of its achievements in the fields of technology and human capital. In an international society with many problems, a Japan that has a "proactive" and "autonomous" foreign policy will lead to self-confidence and pride, he writes⁴⁸. Going by the Bluebook introductions, the picture is thus blurred regarding the discursive elements of values and autonomy during the two LDP governments that followed Abe's first government; values are not there, whereas autonomy is. As Hosoya has surmised, even Aso steering clear of the AFP during his prime ministership might have had to do with how it became regarded as a "right-wing foreign policy doctrine" that would alienate China⁴⁹. In addition to the MOFA Bluebooks, the prime minister's yearly speech to the regular session of the National Diet in January is a useful venue to test which words make appearances and which do not. Fukuda's speech in 2008 contained no references to the words "universal", "values", "democracy", "human rights", "rule of law", or "freedom"⁵⁰. Aso's 2009 speech did, however, stating toward the end that he had "a belief" in how pursuing economic prosperity

⁴⁸ MOFA (2009), 「平成21年版外交青書（外交青書2009）の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書2009 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2009/pdf/pdfs/0_1.pdf. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁴⁹ Hosoya, *The Rise and Fall...*, cit., p. 20.

⁵⁰ Prime Minister's Office (2008), 「第169回国会における福田内閣総理大臣施政方針演説」. [Online], <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndl-jp/pid/233240/www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hukudaspeech/2008/01/18housin.html>. (Accessed on 19.5.2022).

and democracy lead to peace and happiness, and that Japan's past showed this⁵¹. Here, he echoed the narrative of Japan as a long-time democrat that was a major part of his introduction of the AFP in 2006 at the Japan Institute of International Affairs⁵², and likewise a constitutive part of the values/autonomy narrative. Continuing, he said that Japan should support young democracies who value human rights, open markets, and freedom. He dwelled at the start of his speech on the need for Japan to make a "contribution" to a new "order" based on rules. With the financial crisis as a backdrop, this was much focused on the international financial system, but nevertheless resembled talk in the later Abe government of Japan taking on a greater role in contributing to international security, a central part of the autonomy narrative⁵³.

The DPJ came to power in 2009, pushing the LDP out of power for only the second time in the postwar period. The party and particularly its first prime minister, Hatoyama Yukio, had certain "Asianist" leanings, seeking to nurture relations with China and striving for more independence from the U.S.⁵⁴. To that end, his government introduced the idea of an "East Asian Community", and Hatoyama himself has since been involved in the NGO East Asian Community Institute. The ideas represented by Hatoyama are arguably what is left today of what Suzuki called the "idealist left". As Sneider has argued, however, the DPJ ended up "learning" to nurture the U.S.-Japan alliance⁵⁵, and the Bluebooks from the time of the DPJ show, as was the case during Fukuda and Aso, a blurred picture regarding values narratives and references to Japanese autonomy. In 2009, Okada Katsuya as foreign minister focused much of his attention on a need for general "international cooperation"⁵⁶; in 2010, Matsumoto Takeaki called for Japan to

⁵¹ Prime Minister's Office (2009), 「第171回国会における麻生内閣総理大臣施政方針演説」 [Online], <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndl-jp/pid/284573/www.kantei.go.jp/jp/asospeech/2009/01/28housin.html>. (Accessed on 19.5.2022).

⁵² Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...*, cit., pp. 1-14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ D. Sneider, *The New Asianism: Japanese Foreign Policy under the Democratic Party of Japan*, "Asia Policy", vol. 12 (2011), pp. 99-130.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ MOFA (2010), 「平成22年版外交青書（外交青書2010）の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書2010 [Online], <https://www.mofa.go.jp/>

take a “leading role” on the debate on issues like nuclear non-proliferation and military arms control but left out the universal values narrative⁵⁷. Foreign Minister Genba Koichiro, however, did write in 2012 that Japan needs to make efforts to create an “order that is based on rich and stable democratic values”⁵⁸. This is an appearance of the values narrative recognizable from the Abe bluebooks mentioned above and in previous research. Looking at the Diet speeches from the DPJ's prime ministers, Hatoyama did not mention democracy, but did at two points refer to human rights. In the first instance, he was talking about how he wants to “protect lives” in the world, and specifically ensure that “everyone can drink clean water, everyone can, with no discrimination, have their human rights protected and receive an education”⁵⁹. He did state that this involved a necessary “contribution”, as is common in the autonomy narrative to say that Japan needs to take on a leadership role. However, in this case it referred to a contribution that the international community owed to the children he was talking about, with no references to Japan. He also referred to “values”, but in a slightly ambiguous and more pluralist way: Japan had the flexibility to have values and cultures be combined. It should therefore strive to combine “traditional culture” valuing coexistence with nature, with a mindset to be a “bridge” to other cultures⁶⁰. The DPJ's second prime minister, Kan Naoto, did not touch on the values/autonomy narrative in any meaningful way in his speech, mentioning once the need for a free trade area in

mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2010/pdf/pdfs/0_2.pdf. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁵⁷ MOFA (2011), 「平成23年版外交青書（外交青書2011）の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書2010 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2011/pdf/pdfs/0_2.pdf. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁵⁸ MOFA (2012), 「平成24年版外交青書（外交青書2012）の刊行に当たって」 in 『外交青書2012 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/bluebook/2012/pdf/pdfs/0_2.pdf. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁵⁹ Prime Minister's Office (2010), 「第174回国会における鳩山内閣総理大臣施政方針演説」 [Online], <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndl-jp/pid/1042913/www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hatoyama/statement/201001/29sei-housin.html>. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁶⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 第174回..., A connection to *Nihonjinron* ideas which include romanticization of the relationship of the Japanese to nature can be noted here, but is in either case a different animal from the values/autonomy narrative.

Asia⁶¹. The DPJ's third prime minister, Noda Yoshihiko, however, emphasized in his speech how Japan should “deepen dialogue” in Asia on issues where “values” like “freedom”, “democracy”, and “the rule of law” are shared⁶². Noda's bringing this up squares well with his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2012, where he emphasized the importance of the rule of law, and of how Japan has always been committed to it⁶³. This brief exposé of the MOFA Bluebooks and prime ministers' speeches to the Diet from the years between the two Abe governments show, all in all, a slight pause to the official emphasis on universal values – apart from Aso's speech, and Noda's later during the DPJ government – but in either case, it showcases a lingering of the references to Japanese autonomy. The picture is, as mentioned above, blurred, and seems to offer an opportunity to examine different types and different levels of identity anxiety among different Japanese political camps.

Conclusion

This paper's analysis of MOFA Bluebooks and prime minister yearly speeches during the years between the two Abe governments has shown mixed results. References to universal values and Japanese leadership were sparse particularly during the Fukuda, Hatoyama, and Kan governments, but shone through during the governments of Aso and Noda. Given Aso's political leanings, his being the one who introduced the AFP to the world, and his closeness to Abe, it is not particularly surprising that his government showed an interest in this narrative. Noda's touching on these values in his speech

⁶¹ “Free” trade being, arguably, a discursive construction that links a certain type of trade to “freedom”; Prime Minister's Office (2011), 「第176回国会における菅内閣総理大臣所信表明演説」 [Online], <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/kan/statement/201010/01syosin.html> (Accessed on 19.5.2022).

⁶² Prime Minister's Office (2012), 「第百八十回国会における野田内閣総理大臣施政方針演説」 [Online], <https://warp.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/4410784/www.kantei.go.jp/jp/noda/statement2/20120124si-seihousin.html>. (Accessed on 18.5.2022).

⁶³ MOFA (2012), 「第67回国連総会 野田総理による一般討論演説「明日への責任・3つの叡智」」 [Online], https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/unsokai/67_address_pm_jp.html. (Accessed on 13.8.2022).

is a different matter, and rather suggests that universal values are a popular narrative across political camps in Japan. Whether the lack of the universal values/autonomy narrative during the other governments comes from different conceptions of ontological security requires a more in-depth study of which themes move DPJ political groupings and those close to Fukuda in the LDP care about⁶⁴. What the paper has shown, however, is that the long-desired Japanese identity as an autonomous state has indeed been visible in its universal values narrative in the intervening years between the two Abe governments, albeit to a weaker extent than during the Abe governments. This suggests that anxiety related to Japanese autonomy can be a solution to the problem of why Japan emphasizes universal values internationally at the same time as freedom of the press, for example, is experiencing threats at home. The rise of the *Seiwaken* within the LDP has correlated with this new use of universal values together with autonomy rhetoric, and the spread of the combined narrative to parts of the opposition can be seen as a sign of its growing dominance.

How do we make sense of the “blurred picture” between 2008-2012? Given the long-standing ontological insecurities among Japanese political actors regarding autonomy⁶⁵, and the presence of this narrative within universal values narratives⁶⁶, there would seem to be room for an ontological security theory that accounts for part of it. Ontological security studies in International Relations have been accused of uncritically applying a concept made for individuals directly to states⁶⁷. This would seem to assume much continuity, whereas the combined narrative studied here is one that was not present before, and indeed one that displays a measure of discontinuity, since the intervening years had less of it. A more sociological approach to ontological security,

⁶⁴ Fukuda was, it should be mentioned, also from the *Seiwaken*. This reminds us that *Seiwaken* membership is no surefire way to explain the narrative, but does not take away from the fact that the faction is now dominated by members with similar views on Japan's role in the world to that pushed by the Abe governments.

⁶⁵ Suzuki, *The Rise of the Chinese...*, cit., pp. 95-116.

⁶⁶ Isaksson, *Longtime Democrat...*, cit., pp. 1-14.

⁶⁷ K. Gustafsson - N.C. Krickel-Choi, *Returning to the roots of ontological security: insights from the existentialist anxiety literature*, “European Journal of International Relations”, vol. 26 (2020), no. 3, pp. 875-895.

along the lines of what Stuart Croft proposes, one that focuses on how meanings are intersubjectively constructed between individuals and communities within states might be a fruitful venue for future research on an observably widespread but not (during the period studied) dominant conception of universal values and Japanese autonomy⁶⁸. Such an approach would broaden knowledge on how the concern for autonomy, the postwar version of which was originally found in the *Seiwaken* milieu, seems to have gained ground with some during the intervening years (for example Noda), but not others.

This article cannot claim to have proven ontological insecurity as the explanatory variable behind Japan's values narrative, nor did it set out to do so. Stemming from an interpretivist tradition, it hopes, however, to have contributed to a greater understanding of the motivations behind it, without attempting any "falsification" of other explanations⁶⁹. Whether one subscribes to the existence of an all-encompassing Japanese "Grand Strategy" or not, the values narrative of the past two decades is a ubiquitous part of Japanese foreign policy, and as we have seen, that was particularly the case during the Abe governments. Given unstable contemporary geopolitics and Japan's significant material power, how Japanese political actors understand their place in the world is as urgent a question as any.

⁶⁸ S. Croft, *Constructing Ontological Insecurity: The Insecuritization of Britain's Muslims*, "Contemporary Security Policy", vol. 33 (2012), no. 2, pp. 219-235.

⁶⁹ Steele, *Ontological Security...*, cit., p. 8.

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